

29

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Conferees (from left) Wardak, Lehrman, Calero and Savimbi: 'Their goals are our goals'

Lehrman's Contra Conclave

WHO: Anticommunist insurgents from Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Laos and Angola.

WHAT: The formation of an alliance called the Democratic International.

WHEN: Last week.

WHERE: The rebel stronghold of Jamba, Angola.

WHY: Ask drugstore heir, GOP conservative leader and unsuccessful New York gubernatorial candidate Lew Lehrman.

If this all seems a bit bizarre and confusing, it was. Here was Lehrman, who seemingly wants to run for president someday, serving as impresario of an international pep rally for freedom fighters in the middle of the Angolan bush. The contra conclave was privately funded by Lehrman's Citizens for America, but Ronald Reagan contributed a carefully worded letter of support. The two-day conference was a dizzying combination of free-enterprise diplomacy, African pageantry and a hair-raising journey from the staging area in Johannesburg—with more chills reserved for the return trip.

Most of the freedom fighters flew to South Africa from New York, but the original guest list had to be trimmed because of political difficulties. The Pakistani government blocked the departure of Afghan rebel leaders, and Lehrman had to settle for the movement's representatives in Washington. The Mozambique National Resistance Movement also was invited, but South Africa refused to allow them passage to Angola. The Cambodians also were no-shows, although rebel leader Son Sann sent a message of solidarity. Still, to Lehrman's credit, it isn't often (or indeed ever) that you airlift Afghans, Nicaraguan contras and Laotian insurgents to the headquarters of Jonas Sa-

vimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

Lehrman's globe-trotting guerrillas took off from Johannesburg in an aging and overloaded Dakota DC-3, nicknamed the "Vomit Comet." When it left South African air space, the Dakota began to buck and weave as it followed a low-level flight path to avoid radar detection. Inside the plane, some sought relief in the fetid toilet, others grabbed air-sickness bags and two Laotians literally clung to each other for security. Relief, such as it was, came in the form of a landing on a remote bush strip in southern Angola. Lehrman's legions then endured a two-hour, spine-jarring nighttime drive to Jamba.

Convenience was clearly not Lehrman's purpose in choosing Jamba as the site of the conference. Rather, UNITA was singled out as a guerrilla role model: Savimbi's 50,000-man rebel army controls about one-third of Angola. The delegates were impressed as they watched UNITA troops stage mock battles under the fire of live ammunition. "I wish our people could achieve this level of efficiency and discipline," sighed Afghan Brig. Haroom Wardak. Similarly, Nicaraguan contra leader Adolfo Calero said that UNITA had shown him "the Cubans can be beaten."

The four-party concordat establishing the Democratic International called for unity against "the Soviet Empire." At a

mass rally at the Jamba football stadium, Lehrman presented each delegate with a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence. He also read aloud portions of a letter from Reagan, which stated, "[We] have to be moved by the example of men and women who struggle every day, at great personal risk, for rights that we have enjoyed from birth. Their goals are our goals."

Tepid: It sounded like a ringing declaration, but the presidential blessing was, in fact, rather tepid. Lehrman's original plan called for Reagan to make a video cassette greeting the delegates. But the National Security Council preferred a more subdued approach that an NSC aide described as a way to "express our support but keep our distance." After mulling a tape recording and even a shortwave-radio broadcast by Reagan, the NSC decided that the president should merely send Lehrman a letter noting, but not endorsing, the "unique" event. That subtlety was lost on the audience, as Lehrman made it appear that the letter was personally addressed to the delegates.

Lehrman's solidarity with the freedom fighters did not extend to the trip home. He was whisked away after his speech in a light plane. But the delegates and the press spent more than 24 anxious hours at the desolate airstrip waiting for the Dakota. During a long night in the jungle, the party huddled around a fire as the UNITA troops stood guard. Shortly before dawn, a lion roared and everyone jerked awake—the tenderfoots because they thought it was the plane and the old jungle hands because they knew it was a lion.

The meeting was intended, said Lehrman, to bring "hope, encouragement and support" to foes of the Soviet Union. But it



UNITA recruits on parade: 'Efficiency and discipline'

is unclear whether the Democratic International will amount to much of an alliance. As Savimbi warned his colleagues in arms, they should concentrate on building strong bases in their own countries. "Allegiances," said the rebel leader, "shift."

WALTER SHAPIRO with PETER YOUNGHUSBAND
in Jamba and Washington bureau reports